We Capture the London Stage

LONDON, crowded London, is at the height of its "season." And, theatrically, the American play holds sway.

No less than seven all-American productions are drawing the crowds (and they are real crowds, for houses are sold out weeks in advance), and three or four others have a distinct American flavor.

"Fair and Warmer," "Business Before Pleasure," "Eyes of Youth," "The Very Idea" and "Uncle Sam" are some of the straight United States productions, while the popular "Monsieur Beaucaire" retains its Booth Tarkington flavor, although set to music.

With the French cutting in on their part with several comedies and a musical show, the best of the former being "Cyrano de Bergerac," it must be admitted that the English playwright is somewhat out of it. And does he like it? He does not.

Here is what "an English playwright" says of the situation in "The Evening News":

"For the English dramatists, too, have their grievance—a very great one, and one not easily remedied by trade union methods. And so the latest and most desperate suggestion is that we shall all meet secretly and decide to take steps to get naturalized as American citizens, in the hope that we may then be able to get our plays on the English stage. A desperate remedy, I admit, but things have become desperate and that seems The Only Way.

"A year ago things weren't so bad. Besides, only the war mattered then. But for every American play taken off during the last twelve months two have taken its place and three are threatened. We will say nothing about the established and 'still running' plays, and the various musical comedies that have been adapted and adopted for the London stage until their original transatlantic authors would hardly recognize them—except for the royalties. But it is what is pending, imminent and prospective, that alarms us, for we shall soon be driven off the boards and unable to obtain the lodgings.

Left to Amateurs

"Last week two new plays were produced in London, and it need hardly be said that they were both American plays. But if I were to set out in full detail the prospective arrangements for the production of American plays on the London stage during the next year or two, you would ask yourself where theatre room was going to be found for them all. But the question that interests, and depresses, the English playwright is what room they are going to leave for the production of English plays. What with American managers who have leased London theatres years ahead, and the English managers who have bought American plays under contract to produce them within early dates, it looks very much as though the playgoer who wants to see an English play on the London stage will have to look up the season's programme of the amateur dramatic societies and venture forth to the town halls of Streatham, Ealing and Walthamstow.

"Now a newspaper column allows no scope for circumlocutory compliments and camouflage. And so I will not waste space in any polite and labored effort to dispel any illusion that American plays are of such a superior order to English plays that the American dramatist is obliging us by making up for our own artistic deficiencies. It might be so, but it happens that it isn't so. As some one has said, the American plays staged in London are not bad enough to make English dramatists jealous, but are just bad enough to make them furious. In any case, I hold no brief for American plays, and all that need be said of them is that the best might be worse, but the worst could not possibly be. There is, then, no question of professional jealousy in the grievance, for the imported American drama is simply not so superior to the home-grown variety as to justify the prospective avalanche on the ground that 'art has no frontiers.'

War and the Boom

"But here's the rub! While the war was on most of us were content to lie fallow, for that supreme and poignant drama was too actual to leave much room in our hearts and minds for the mimic drama. So some of us were content to leave the English stage to the 'crook' importations from America and to the 'spy play' home-made pot-boilers, while feeling immense respect for the few native playwrights who were able to 'carry on' and give us their best while the war was on. Most of us, however, I think, stored up our emotions, waiting for the final curtain of Armageddon before we could even feel certain that what we wished to write would be produced in an England still mistress of herself.

"But 'the boom' arose—a boom due to the fact that a war-wracked population and war-stained soldiers needed amusement and were not particularly particular what sort of amusement it was so long as it took them 'out of themselves.' And so the transatlantic play came to be imported by the dozen, and now that peace has come and the old ways are open once more, we find that the English drama is elbowed off its own hearth—which is the London stage—and dramatists of repute and established reputations, whose accepted plays are ready to 'go on,' are faced with the certainty that the London stage will have little room for them for years to come.

"I repeat, it is not a question of professional jealousy, but of the simple fact that plays about English people, problems, morals and manners are now crowded out by plays about other people and their problems and morals and manners; and that the rich and vivid material bequeathed to us by the war in its relation to our national life is practically denied dramatic presentation because an alien drama now holds a disproportionate share of the English dramatic hearth.

"I put it to any reasonable man whether it is not a ridiculous thing that one of our best theatres should be giving hospitality, however lucrative, to a play dealing with the hyphenated German-American view of the war, when plays dealing with our own outlook in relation to the war cannot find stage room. And when you read that an English actress, returning to the stage and to theatrical management, is going to reopen her career with a play about the American housing problem, a play which (we are told) has done 'valuable propaganda work in the States,' does it not occur to you that it is a humiliating example of the neglect of native dramatic art? For, of course, if the actress-manager really wants a housing play, written for the English stage and from the standpoint of our own housing problems, there are a good dozen of English authors who would tackle that problem with, at any rate, an equal dramatic competence and most assuredly with infinitely more profit to the 'problem' than any play dealing with it as it exists in another hemisphere.

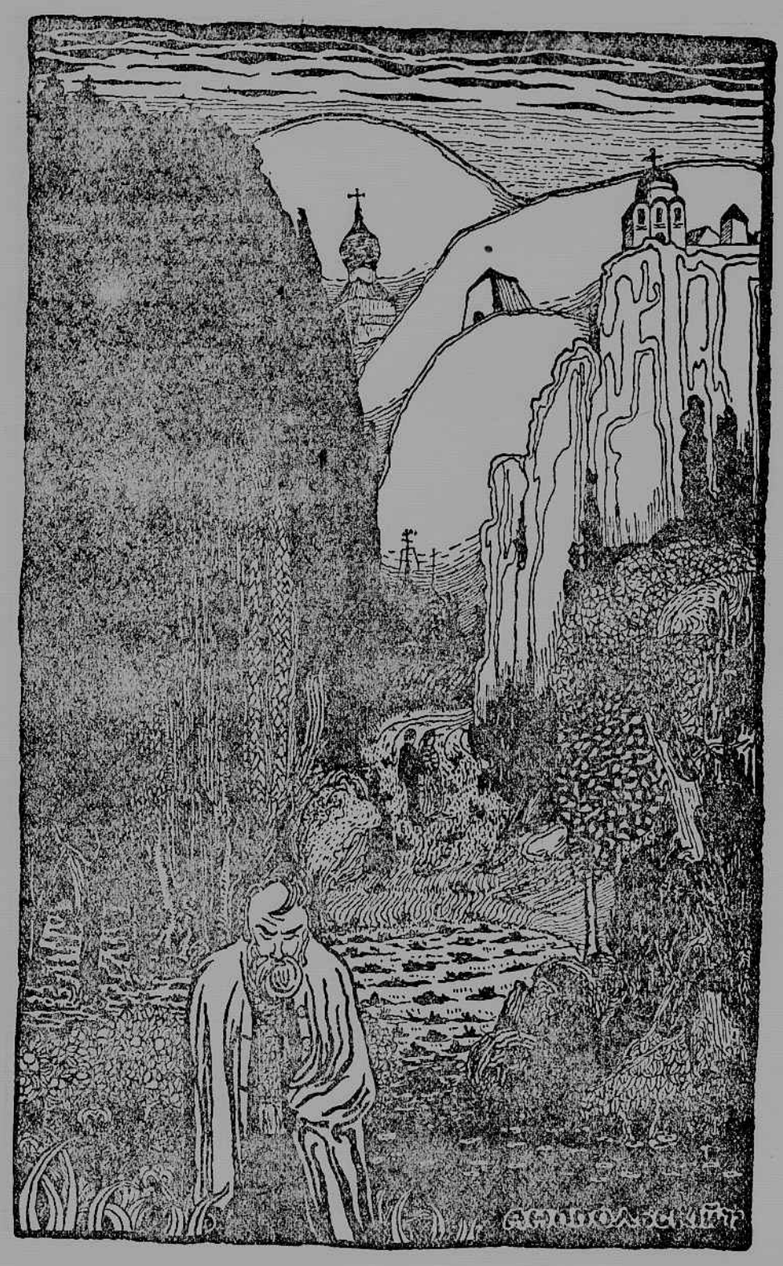
Alien or Native?

"But the odd thing is that it never seems to occur to our purveyors of theatrical fare that London is not merely a rather cosmopolitan capital, but that it is the capital of the British Empire, and above all, of England, and that the duty of English theatrical management begins at home.

"I have not left myself the space in which to point out where the fault lies in this supremacy of the alien drama and the consequent 'freezing out' of the native product. But if any English theatrical manager ventures to say that the fault lies with either the British public or the British dramatist, I shall be very pleased to venture to show him why he is mistaken and where the fault really lies."

Register the protest, but, suggests a Tribune correspondent in London, "give the American play the verdict." The box office tells the story!

Russian Castles: By Igor Y. Chanaris-Anopolsky—From "Asia"



Build
Beautiful castles,
My children,
And see
That they be
High—
High—
Above the clouds.
Also
See,
My children,
That you paint the towers
Gold—
Bright gold—
Brighter
Than the sun
That shall dim them.

See,
My children,
See
That forests,
With beautiful gardens,
Surround them.
But remember,
My children,
That they be
Thick—
Thicker than the rushing waters
That shall destroy them.

In them,
My children,
Place
Soft
Soft
Rugs,
And forget not
To hang
Beautiful colored curtains—
More beautiful
Than the wild birds
That shall pass them.

Then,
My children,
Lie down
And dream,
Dream
Until the weight
Of those passing grey clouds
Awakens
You . . .
I, also,
Was a child.

Joseph Conrad's "Atmosphere"

OPENING his essay on Joseph Conrad's short stories, in "The Catholic World," with inevitable comment upon the famous Polish writer's passion for the sea, Joseph J. Reilly, Ph. D., launches into some fine paragraphs celebrating the almost uncanny force with which the appeal of Conrad's pictures must strike any sensitive and imaginative reader. To quote a bit:

"During Conrad's twenty years as a sailor he visited the remotest corners of the world and gives us a series of varied and unforgettable pictures; there are faraway islands which, a mass of green, 'lie upon the level of a polished sea, like a handful of emeralds on a buckler of steel.' There are rivers whose virgin waters have never been ploughed by a white man's boat, beaches upon whose thundering surf stands the cottage of a Nelson, a Renouard or a Van Wyk, with striped awnings, attractive flower beds, and walks of imported gravel. Again, he pictures a white man's hut smothered amid rank verdure on the squalid edge of a Malay settlement where a hapless discard of civilization might drag out an uncertain existence. Again, he gives us what he calls ironically 'an outpost of civilization' far up a lonely river where the boat of some trading company's director finds its way twice a year, and where the deadly heat destroys men's bodies as pitilessly as the contact with savagery and the abandonment of the decalogue destroy their souls. Here is a vivid page from 'The Lagoon': a white man and his Malay servants are paddling up a tropical river:

"'At the end of the straight avenue of forests cut by the intense glitter of the river the sun appeared unclouded and dazzling, poised low over the water that shone smoothly like a band of metal. The forests, sombre and dull, stood motionless and silent on each side of the broad stream. At the foot of the big, towering trees trunkless nipa palms rose from the mud of the bank, in bunches of leaves enormous and heavy, that hung unstirring over the brown swirl of the eddies. In the stillness of the air every tree, every leaf, every bough, every tendril of creeper and every petal of minute blossoms seemed to have been bewitched into an immobility perfect and final. . . . The white man's canoe, advancing up stream . . . seemed to enter the portals of a land from which the very memory of motion had forever departed. . . .'

"'Astern of the boat the repeated call of some bird, a cry discordant and feeble, skipped along over the smooth water and lost itself, before it could reach the other shore, in the breathless silence of the world. . . . Suddenly the slanting beams of sunset touched the broadside of the canoe with a fiery glow, throwing the slender and distorted shadows of its crew upon the streaked glitter of the river. . . . Immense trees soared up, invisible behind the festooned draperies of creepers. Here and there a twisted root of some tall tree showed among the tracery of small ferns, black and dull, writhing and motionless, like an arrested snake. . . . Darkness oozed out from between the trees, through the tangled maze of the creepers, from behind the great fantastic and unstirring leaves; the darkness, mysterious and invincible; the darkness scented and poisonous of impenetrable forests.' No man writing to-day has beheld such a scene as this, or, if he had, could realize it in words with such compelling vividness.

To Make You See

"'My task,' Conrad once wrote, 'which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see.' That man is, indeed, blind in soul as in vision to whom this scene, as by a conjurer's wand, is not made palpable as this very body.

"Conrad's, however, is no mere photographer's skill. He can make his scenes impress the retina of the soul no less than of the eye by giving them that something which is baffling, indefinable and yet distinctive, which we call personality in men and atmosphere in scenes. But Conrad's strength is also his weakness. For at times his descriptions become a riot of adjectives and colorful substantives which produce upon the reader's mind nothing but a brilliant blur. Such prodigality recalls Ruskin's notorious description of Turner's 'Slave Ship,' regarding which Thackeray remarked that he wasn't certain whether it was sublime or merely ridiculous. In each man's case the fault was due to a retouching, lavish and deliberate, upon which he fell back in that inevitable hour of doubt when the writer questions the authenticity of his inspiration and the devil tempts him to seek to support it by the deceptive potency of mere words.

"'Conscious of his descriptive powers, Conrad loves to indulge them. In his earlier work he was prone to forget that long descriptive passages fatigue the reader unless surcharged with an immediate—and sustaining—human interest. This is the chief weakness of 'The Typhoon.' But he has learned an ampler wisdom since, and in one of the most brilliant of his later descriptions he has succeeded in combining the human interest with the compelling attraction of the sea at dawn. Freya Nelson has slipped out upon the veranda of her island home to wave farewell to her lover, Jasper Allen, as he passes aboard the Bonito:

"'The green islets appeared like black shadows, the ashen sea was smooth as glass, the clear robe of the colorless dawn, in which even the brig appeared shadowy, had a hem of light in the east. Directly Freya had made out Jasper on deck, with his own long glass directed to the bungalow, she laid hers down and raised both her beautiful white arms above her head. In that attitude of supreme cry she stood still, glowing with the consciousness of Jasper's adoration going out to her figure held in the field of his glass. . . . She brought both her hands to her lips, then flung them out, sending a kiss over the sea, as if she wanted to throw her heart along with it on the deck of the brig. Her face was rosy, her eyes shone. . . . The slowly ascending sun brought the glory of color to the world, turning the islets green, the sea blue, the brig below her white—dazzlingly white in the spread of her wings—with the red ensign streaming like a tiny flame from the peak. And each time she murmured with a rising inflection: 'Take this—and this—and this'—till suddenly her arms fell. She had seen the ensign dipped in response, and next moment the point below hid the hull of the brig from her view.'

"What color, what nerve, what harmony of things animate and inanimate, as if both brig and sea shared in the youth and beauty and passion of the lovers!

"'At the very outset of his stories Conrad gives us their setting. Be it a beach, a tropical river, a swarming Malay village, he describes it opulently, minutely, with a wealth of significant detail which convinces us that his eye is upon the scene as he writes. There is in his work an insistence which reminds one of Poe: just as Poe exerts a pressure upon the reader's attention in order to achieve the fullest effect of his climax, so Conrad throughout the course of his story insists upon the reality of its setting. On occasions the pressure seems overdone; again, it is so subtle as to leave the reader unconscious of its presence, but all the time it is there. In a word, as I suggested before, Conrad has the genius for creating atmosphere. And that atmosphere is an essential of the story."

Thomas Hardy Will Be Seventy-Nine To-morrow

TO-MORROW is Thomas Hardy's birthday. He was born on June 2, 1840, seventy-nine years ago, at Rockhampton, Dorset. He was educated at local schools, 1848-'54, and afterward privately, and in 1856 was articled to John Hicks, an ecclesiastical architect of Dorchester.

In 1859 he began writing verse and essays, but in 1861 was compelled to apply himself more strictly to architecture, sketching and measuring many old Dorset churches with a view to their restoration. In 1863 he won the medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects for an essay on "Colored Brick and Terra Cotta Architecture," and in the same year won the prize of the Architectural Association for design. In March, 1865, his first short story was published in "Chambers's Journal," and during the next two or three years he wrote a good deal of verse, being somewhat uncertain whether to take to architecture or literature.

In 1874 Hardy married Miss Emma Lavinia, daughter of the late T. Attersoll Gifford, of Plymouth.

His first popular success was made by "Far From the Madding Crowd," in 1874, which, on its appearance in "The Cornhill Magazine" anonymously, was attributed by many to George Eliot. "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," written in 1891, and "Life's Little Ironies," written in 1894, are two of the writer's most popular and famous works, although he has written much fiction and verse since that time. The change from fictionist to poet in the autumn of life may be said to be quite unusual, but his late poetry written at this stage reveals a poetic facility and grace theretofore concealed in the man except in his striking prose expression.

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HARDY the poet is far less familiar to the general public than Hardy the novelist. Yet it has been pointed out that the Great War did much to bring out of Hardy the true poetic, yet original, form that he possesses. Too, it afforded him play for his melancholy logic, as in the following poem, "Belgian Expatriation," which appeared in 1914 in "King Albert's Book":

I dreamt that people from the Land of Chimes
Arrived one autumn morning with their bells,
To hoist them on the towers and citadels
Of my own country, that the musical rhymes
Rung by them into space at measured times
Amid the market's daily stir and stress,
And the night's empty stir and silentness,
Might solace souls of this and kindred climes.
Then I awoke: and lo, before me stood
The visioned ones, but pale and full of fear;
From Bruges they came, and Antwerp, and Ostend.
No carillons in their train. Vicissitude
Had left these tinkling to the invaders' car,
And ravaged street, and smouldering gable end.

"Time's Laughing Stock and Other Poems," by Hardy, appeared in 1909. "Wessex Poems," written during the previous thirty years, was published in book form in 1898. The former represent the author's autumnal transition from prose to verse, as do his later war verses, and the latter his first poetic successes.

"Hap," which was written in 1866, yet appeared in the "Wessex Poems" years later, disclosed the same spiritual attitude that underlies his famous "Tess." "Hap" is here reprinted:

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky and laugh:
"Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting,"
Then would I bear and clench myself and die,
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
Half-eased, too, that a Powerfuller than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.
But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dying Time for gladness casts a moan. . . .
These purblind doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

* * * * *

SOMETHING of the poet's dramatic gift, it has been suggested, may be seen in the following lines, entitled "She: At His Funeral":

They bear him to his resting place—
In slow procession sweeping by;
I follow at a stranger's pace;
His kindred they, his sweetheart I.
Unchanged my gown of garish dye,
Though sable-clad is their attire;
But they stand round with griefless eye,
Whilst my regret consumes like fire.

These two poems last quoted were criticised at the time of their publication as characteristic of the work of a minor poet of that day, and Mr. Hardy as a poet was described as commonplace. However, recent years have lifted the writer above that criticism, and the first poem quoted in this article is typical of those that have won the poet-author no little measure of fame and esteem as such, as well as the Nobel Prize in 1914.

Thomas Hardy

THE COUNTRY TOWN—By Mme. Lucie Delarue-Madrus

Translated by William L. McPherson

Here is a little vignette by Mme. Lucie Delarue-Madrus. It deals with a familiar mental experience, occurring wherever there are country towns and villages for citified ex-residents to go back to. It is unpretentious and casual in form, but it is animated by a delicate sense of reality and a touch of genial pleasantry.

MME. BOQUETEAU sighed. Revisiting the little town where she had lived as a child had upset her more or less. It was thirty years since she had left it. Twenty years ago she had married and settled in Paris. Business connected with an inheritance had brought her back for a day. An old aunt had died and left her some effects, which, though they had no great value, were at least worth a trip of inspection.

M. Boqueteau, her husband, a man already growing gray, accompanied her. The children remained in Paris.

They were making a tour of the town while waiting to take the train home.

"You see that house?" said Mme. Boqueteau. "That was Mlle. Crochu's boarding house, of which I have often spoken."

A little further on she exclaimed: "You see that grocery store? That is where we used to go to get the caramels I told you about."

The husband smiled vaguely, with that air of resignation which he always wore when Mme. Boqueteau recalled the memories of her childhood. Childhood memories don't interest others—not even husbands.

It was the first time that he had ever seen this little town, which was only a little town, without any interest whatever, like so many others. Although these down-at-the-heel houses and shabby streets had for his wife all the value of exhibits in a museum, they failed to make his heart beat a second faster.

But Mme. Boqueteau's heart fluttered.

"Oh! There's the fountain! There's the watering trough!"

One would have thought that she was going to clap her hands. Or that she was going to burst into tears.

"There's the Rue de l'Homme Vert! Mon Dieu! The Rue de l'Homme Vert!"

Nevertheless, she realized, in spite of her touch of melancholy ecstasy, that if the old houses looked as they used to look their souls were no longer the same, being a composite of the souls of their occupants. So the present world can in no way resemble the world of our childhood.

"Oh! Look. There is where Jeanne Louviers used to live. You know her well—my school companion. You must remember. The one whose mother sang 'My darling, It Is April,' at all our parties, because that was the only air she ever learned. And to think that now Jeanne Louviers must be forty years old, like myself, and her mother over sixty!"

The husband, who wasn't listening, tranquilly interrupted her. They had just turned a corner.

"Well!" he said, "there is a shop where they sell condensed milk. We'd better buy several cans. In Paris you can't find any anywhere."

His stolid face had brightened at last. Nowadays such practical emotions stir the hearts of people, worried by the annoyances of the high cost of living.

Mme. Boqueteau stopped talking. With a sense of bitterness she swallowed down her half-finished story. With a choking feeling she followed M. Boqueteau, who had rushed enthusiastically into the shop in question.

It was, as it happened, a new establishment, which could evoke no memories of the past. The sign outside read: "Pastry, confections." But, naturally, they no longer sold anything of the sort. The cakes and bonbons had given place to articles more suited to war time: Preserves, salted meats and eggs.

M. Boqueteau became suddenly full of conversation. The boy who waited on him cheerfully answered his many questions about food conditions in the provinces. Highly interested, the Parisian stored up all the information available, with that love of precision in details which characterizes masculine gossip.

With what resignation she could summon Mme. Boqueteau supported this conversation, which greatly bored her. And all the while her treasured recollections, outraged by these alien preoccupations, continued to stir her heart.

Since it was she who held the purse she finally stepped up to the cashier's desk to pay for what her husband had bought. As she presented a bill her glance met the cashier's. She started back in surprise. The other, too, looked curiously at her. Then both exclaimed at the same moment:

"It's you!"

"Jeanne Louviers!" cried Mme. Boqueteau, in astonishment.

"Juliette Le Hoc!" exclaimed the cashier.

They clasped hands. Both uttered little cries and the words came thick and fast.

"What a long time it has been!"

"So you are married and have children!"

"Here is my husband. And you—what about you?"

"I am not married. And as my father has retired from business and times are hard, I had to do something."

Her husband having come up to be presented, Mme. Boqueteau made him an imperceptible sign before saying, with a poor little laugh which measured the distance between the present and the past:

"Oh, don't you remember, Jeanne, the parties which we used to go to?"

Like a child, she continued in a tone of innocent raillery:

"Does your mother still sing, 'My Darling, It Is April'?"

The elderly looking Jeanne Louviers swelled out her portly chest and answered with a satisfied smile:

"'My Darling, It Is April'? Why, yes. Mamma sang it last evening at the house of the new Mme. Levesque, the wife of the notary. And she had a wonderful success—as she always has."